

When a Brother Sins Against You, Part One

Written by Bob Stone

It is apparent a church is drastically limited and even defeated if the practice of loving reconciliation is not a part of that church's life—1 Cor. 6:7. What is disturbing is that in many ways believers are following the practices of those outside the church, in order to bring about resolution to differences between two opposing parties. This is seen particularly in lawsuits and divorces between Christians, as well as in general church dysfunction.

Jesus has given us a complete and concise answer to this dilemma in Matt. 18:15-20. This teaching, although forgotten by many, needs to be reestablished as the only acceptable means of reconciliation between brothers and sisters in Christ (members of the church). The process has mixed reviews in and out of the church. There are those who feel it is impractical and illegal in the 21st century, and there are some fanatical groups who have taken this process beyond what Jesus intended. Still, these are Jesus' words, and if properly understood and practiced in the Spirit of Christ, they are very effective in bringing reconciliation between believers.

Bill Gothard has written, "If God gave me the opportunity to exchange my life for the establishment of one truth among all Christians, and I wanted to make my life count to the greatest possible extent, I would choose the truth of Matthew 18 in the spirit of Galatians 6:1." I agree. Matthew 18 is one of the most significant passages of Scripture in the Bible, and also one of the clearest step-by-step instructions that Christ gave to His disciples. (Read Matthew 18:15-20.)

The Steps of Reconciliation

Matthew 18:15-20

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 18 "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by

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my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

It is interesting that Jesus began to speak about steps of reconciliation before the church was birthed. Notice the context (vv. 12-13—*"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off"*). Jesus shows us in this parable the need to seek after those who have fallen into sin, and have thus separated themselves from the care of the flock (church).

The problem that Jesus addresses in vv. 15-20 is a sin problem between believers; in fact, the process we're discussing must only be involved in the process with a brother or a sister. These steps will not work between unbelievers, nor between a believer and an unbeliever.

If, however, a spiritual relationship is present, we must be aware:

God and the world expects us to show loyalty to each other.

1 John 3:16—*"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."*

Gal. 6:10—*"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."*

One of the best tests of our love for our brothers and sisters, in fact, is to be willing to confront—Prov. 27:6. Why must we confront?

This person sins.

15] *"If your brother sins. . ."*

Sin is defined as "to miss the mark." The Greek tense here indicates a specific act of sin.

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Who do they sin against?

This person sins against you.

15] *"If your brother sins against you. . . "*

It is a specific sin, the breaking of God's laws and principles. If we read about Nathan's confrontation with David, for example, it is obvious it involved a specific sin—2 Sam. 12. This is an illustration of what is happening in Matthew 18. It is also a sin that will be apparent if two or three believers are called in as witnesses. It is verifiable by a specific passage of Scripture.

We are not talking here about a weakness nor a personality defect; we all have them. Most often they don't endanger our relationships. If these weaknesses become points of conflict, a word of encouragement, discussion, or rebuke is called for; then they are allowed to pass. Here in Matthew 18, Jesus is talking about things that the Word of God has already judged.

The Solution

What is the answer?

The first step in reconciliation is to go to restore your brother/sister by yourself. v. 15—*"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you..."* This means personally taking the initiative to work things out. It is easy to pass judgment in our mind or to tell someone else, hoping they'll do something about it. It is even easy to go and blast the other person for their wrong. In verse 15, however, we are called to go in a specific way and with a specific attitude.

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Our going must be in the spirit of Gal. 6:1-5. 1] *"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."* What does our going imply?

Should we be prepared in some way?

First, we must examine our spiritual lives.

- Have I tested my own life to see if I am spiritual?—Gal. 6:1,3-5; 5:22-23
- Am I able to go to this person in gentleness and humility?—Gal. 6:1; Matt. 11:29
- Am I willing to carry their burdens and love them?—Gal. 6:2. Lovingly carrying another's burdens is fulfilling the law of Christ—Gal. 5:14.
- Have I failed in a similar area in my own life? -Rom. 2:1-3. Maybe I am projecting my own sin into the person's life.
- Have I failed in my example to him/her?—Heb. 12:12-13
- Is there an offense or attitude on my part which has contributed to my brother's/sister's sin? If so, I need to go under the steps of Matt. 5:23-24— *"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24] leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."*

After the personal inventory is over, then:

Second, we must work out the steps of restoration. Are we prepared to restore?

The idea of restoring a brother assumes we have suggestions/steps of action to get him/her out of the trap.

The word restore means to mend, to bring someone back to wholeness or soundness.

In other words, it is to help, not hurt. 1 Thess 5:14—*"...help the weak..."* Once a spiritual inventory and some possible steps of restoration are worked out, the offended person must go and show the offender his/her specific fault (sin).

"... go and show him his fault..."

How do we show the fault? Here are some suggestions:

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- "I always want to give a good report about you to anyone who asks. For this reason, I wonder if you could explain something I don't understand." Asking a question gives the person a chance to respond without feeling con-demned. Jesus, for example, asked many questions of the woman at the well—John 4:1-40.

- "Is there something I have done to cause you to react to me in this way?"

- "This is difficult to share with you, because I love you so much. I saw you (or heard you say) _____. Will you tell me how you feel about it?" The person you are talking to may not realize what he/she has said or done, so may be helped immeasurably by your talk. One author said, "Perhaps the greatest offense comes through words, and so often the one who says them is not aware of what they mean to other people. By having an offender hear what his words meant to us in our frame of reference, we will help to expand his thinking and to become more precise in his message to others. When we assume that a man meant what we heard him say and then attack him for it, we are using Satan's most effective method of dividing Christians within the church."

Before we go and speak to anyone about their faults/sins, then, it is essential that *"each one should test his own actions"*

—Gal. 6:4. We should also be prepared to ask questions of the person, before we make pronouncements or judgments about our concerns.

Now, notice how many are to be present in this first step.

This action is to be taken by yourself-"just between the two of you."

It means strict privacy. It forbids blurting out the matter in public, or spreading the secret to someone else. Prov. 11:13—*"A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret."*

This instruction forbids logging the complaint first before the church, the pastor, or close friends. Go privately first to the person who has sinned. Prov. 18:8—*"The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts."*

Why is this so important?

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This direction is intended to shield the sinning brother from gossip, slander, and the immature responses of others. Prov. 16:28—*"A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends."* Also, it makes it easier for the offending person to confess the sin and to ask for pardon, without the scrutiny of many others. If we fail to heed this instruction to go privately first,

1. We prove we don't love the offender (I Pet. 4:8—*"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins"*), and we don't love the Lord as we should (John 14:15—*"If you love me, you will obey what I command"*).

2. We may tempt the listener to take up the offense themselves, and that may destroy a friendship. Prov. 16:28b—*"...a gossip separates close friends."*

3. We destroy the sincerity of our approach, and we hinder the potential of restoring him or her. James 4:11-12—*"Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. 12] There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?"*

Go expecting three good results

v. 15b—*"If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."*

The prayer and expectation is that **he/she will listen to us**. The word "listen" means "to hear, so as to yield to the conviction, and then confess, and in sorrow ask a pardon." By faith, believe God will do this for you.

The second result to be expected is that **we will win or maintain a good relationship with a brother or sister**.

Keep in mind, if we go with the motive to make the offending person pay for what he has done, then we may have fallen into one of the temptations alluded to in Gal. 6:1b—*"...But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."*

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A loving relationship with all members of the Church is not an option. Some think it is, so they go for years hating, being angry, and embittering others because they are unwilling to take the initiative and pay the price for obedience to this command. This should never be! First John 4:7-8 says, *"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8] Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."*

The third good result expected is that **we will help to free another brother or sister from sin.** It is possible our participation in this process will be the means the Lord uses to free someone from a sin that has plagued him/her. It will certainly save that person from the effects of continued sin. James 5:19-20— *"My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20] remember this: Whoever turns a sinner away from his error will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."*

1. What do we do if the accusation is against a pastor or more than one individual?

If against an elder/pastor, the instruction is found in 1 Tim. 5:17-20. The church council/board/session should not listen to charges unless the first two steps of Matt. 18:15-17 are followed first. If the sin is verified and not repented of, they will be responsible to deal with the pastor/elder in accordance with the Scripture, the church constitution, and/or denominational bylaws/procedures. The temptation will be to use rumors/others as allies; that is sin, and will be grounds for the institution of Matthew 18:15-17 in your own life.

If the accusation is not against a pastor/elder, then you might ask your pastor or elder(s) for advice. Some sins involve more than an offense against one brother; they may involve several brothers, all of them seeing and knowing the deed. Or the sin may be altogether public at once involving the entire congregation, such as an open scandal or crime. (See Interpretation of Matthew 18, by C.C.H. Lenski.)

In 1 Cor. 5, we see how the apostle Paul responded when a whole church sinned. Since we are not apostles, this special circumstance has few options. Remember that the focus of Matthew 18:15-17 is the local church. Therefore, the primary source of counsel in "multiple sins/persons" situations must be your pastor. Speak to him in the

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spirit of Matthew 18:15-17 and Galatians 6:1-2 and ask for his counsel, i.e., go just between the two of you and with gentleness. If the sin is verifiable with Scripture, and if your pastor concludes that your attitude and action have not contributed to the sin, he may be your witness/spokesman to speak to those sinning, e.g., the congregation.

If the sin takes place in a para-church ministry, or in another church, then go through the first two steps and leave the situation for the Lord to reveal and correct—2 Thess. 1:6-7; 2 Tim. 4:14-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Tim. 3:8-9.

1. What if the person does not listen to our private confrontation?

An attitude of sorrow and disappointment should fill us when our purpose fails. We must then go to the next step in reconciliation: to go with two or three witnesses. v. 16—*"But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."* This means there has been a definite refusal to listen, even though confronted with accurate information and a specific sin. v. 16—*"But if he will not listen..."*

"Does not listen" in the aorist tense here, means he definitely refuses to listen and be convicted. Whenever a brother intentionally sins against another and refuses to acknowledge the sin and/or repent, this is a test as to whether he really intends to stay in the church, or is a believer at all. This doesn't mean, however, that the battle is lost, because Jesus says the offended party now has a choice to take one or two others along with him. v. 16b—*"take one or two others along..."*

Why would this be helpful? Won't this drag others into the situation unnecessarily? Remember, the Lord is giving the instruction, so we must believe He knows best. Reading carefully we see that this verse gives us the purpose for the second and third person. v. 16c—*"...so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."* Here Jesus gives us two specific reasons for the witnesses: the establishment of sin (the matter); and the testimony of the witnesses.

First, the establishment of the sin (matter). The additional person(s) can be very helpful. How? The one or two other people can help to verify if a sin has really been committed. It's now not just one person's opinion opposed to another. For the witnesses, this may involve asking questions and listening to both sides of the conflict. Here are some questions:

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Is there a good spirit displayed in the person supposedly affected by the injustice? If not, then that will need to be corrected before anyone proceeds with the matter.

Did the person being confronted understand what was said to them in the first step?

Is the person initiating the process free from any wrongdoing themselves? If not, help them remove the beam in their eye so they can see clearly.

Matt. 7:1-5—*"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2] For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. 3] Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4] How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5] You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."*

Is a specific sin addressed here? What is the specific command (with chapter and verse) being broken?

On the other hand, is the sin being talked about (by the one initiating the process) hearsay, or based on rumor?

Is the focus of the meeting about a disputable matter?

Some random answers/responses to the above questions might be the following:

If there is a specific sin being committed, the witness(es), or the person offended may have to point out the violations again, with an open Bible in hand.

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If the sin cannot be verified, and only a rumor has been the basis for the meeting, then the witness(es) should point that out.

If the person denies the charge, and there is no proof to the contrary, then pray and ask God to reveal the truth, and wait and/or seek counsel from your pastor/spiritual leaders.

Finally, if there is a difference of opinion about a disputable matter, e.g., Rom. 14:1-15:3, then in love, both sides should share their viewpoint, and agree to disagree. Where no violation of Scripture has occurred, the matter should be left to the Lord.

With those questions and actions, the matter should then be established. That leads to a second reason for the witnesses:

The second reason for this second step is to get the testimony of the two witnesses.

v. 16c—*"...so that the matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."* This can be very helpful if it is needed.

For instance, if a sin has been committed, before the matter is taken any further, the two witnesses can appeal to the person who has sinned. They may add more insight to the matter and can testify also that the one who has brought them to the meeting has legitimate reasons for doing so. Having to face another person(s) also makes it more difficult to deny or to say it doesn't matter what the person said in the first meeting. There's a whole lot more pressure now to look at the situation at hand and deal with it.

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If the person responds properly to the second step, a brother or sister has been won over and a right relationship has been re-established. **Praise God!** If, however, the church takes this matter to the third step because this person refuses to repent, then there are two witnesses as to what the sin was, and the response of the offending party.

That leads us to some important things we need to note. The guidelines of this second step are as follows:

The witness or witnesses ought to be chosen carefully, if the step is to be successful. They must be spiritual people as described in Gal. 6:1-2, and have the same approach as outlined there. They can't be just a few cronies or unstable people who have not displayed spiritual maturity—1 Cor. 3:1-4.

They should take the stance of neutrality until all the facts are heard.

In cases involving words that were spoken to the offended party by the alleged offender, then the one or two others can confirm what was really meant by those words.

In the event the second step fails:

The third step of reconciliation is to take the matter to the church. v. 17—*"but if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church."*

The third step calls for a meeting to hear the case. The attenders of the meeting can consist of the spiritual leaders of the church, e.g., the elders, or all the members who are truly the church.

Most churches have chosen to make this the elders, pastor(s), church council/board session first. They will evaluate the process up to this point, and if need be, tell it to the church through a members only meeting. It is important that those hearing the case be a

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spiritual body and have the same attitude and purpose as the one participating in the first step.

Remember, the purpose of the elders meeting and/or the members meeting is still not to expose, but rather to enlist the help of the congregation in the program of restoration. The third step may at last cause the brother who has sinned to finally hear; then the congregation/leadership team will hear and accept his repentance and assure him of pardon. Something very important must take place, however, before a meeting of the elders or members proceeds.

The third step should cause the whole church to examine themselves and see if they in any way have contributed to the offense. If they have, they need to ask the offender for forgiveness too. If they truly humble themselves, this may give the offender a powerful motivation to repent as well. This step is ineffective, however, if the person is not attending the church (or another church). Self-expulsion may accomplish what is needed. (See Appendix for guidelines in these instances.)

If they won't listen, that leads to the fourth step.

The fourth step of reconciliation is to expel, or put out of the congregation, the offender. v. 17b—"*...and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan and a tax collector...*"

If the man/woman refuses to hear even the church, by either refusing to face the church, or facing it with an unrepentant heart, then this final step must be taken with great sorrow. During the meeting, the witnesses testify. It should be proven that the offender has acted sinfully and has convincingly been shown to be such. This phrase in 17b assumes that the church is in agreement as to the wrong of this particular offense, and has somehow communicated its concerns to the person in step 3, i.e., personally or by those sent to represent the church. Each church may do this step a little differently.

If there is a division, with some saying he is right and others saying he is wrong, the church leaders are to teach concerning the area of the offense, so that there is one mind and one spirit among them. (See Appendix for an example.) If the congregation is united

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and the brother persists in the offense, then the time has come when the sinner is to be treated differently. v. 17b—"*...and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan and a tax collector.*" (See 1 Cor. 6:9-13.) The sinner is now to be treated as a Gentile or a publican.

In Christ's day, every Gentile was outside of Israel, and none of its spiritual blessings belonged to him/her. Every publican/collector of taxes was also expelled, and was in the same category as one who had separated himself/herself from Israel. The expelled member is: "one who is not a sheep, nor wants to be sought, but intends to be completely lost"—Luther.

Keep this in mind, however: if a congregation takes this final step, it is still intended to bring the offender to his senses, if that is still possible. The prayer is that this action may lead the person to see how serious his acts are. On the other hand, if he/she laughs at this step, he/she is laughing at the logical consequences of his/her actions. The church is the final court of appeal.

There is verification for this process elsewhere in Scripture. Reading through the Bible, you find many examples of this principle and its effect.

1. 1 Tim. 5:19-21 deals with an offending elder in the church. 19] *"Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. 20] Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning."*

2. 2 Thess. 3:14-15 tells about the idle man. 14] *"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. 15] Yet do not regard him as an enemy but warn him as a brother."*

3. In 1 Cor. 5:9-13, Paul tells how to respond to the immoral person.

Conclusion

Jesus has given us some very difficult instructions to carry out, if we stop here. We also need to see the unbelievable resources our Lord promises to those who are obedient to His commands.

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In addition, in Part 2 we'll look at a case study of a church that did not follow this instruction. It's a powerful lesson on the effects of disobedience.

In the meantime, do you know someone who has sinned against you, or is caught in a sin? If you do, what are you going to do about it? Believe Jesus; obedience is the only way to go!